

Theory and practice of the region: a contextual analysis of the transformation of Finnish regions¹

Anssi Paasi
Kaj Zimmerbauer
Department of Geography
University of Oulu

Abstract

Regions and regional identities are today important in academic research, regional planning schemes, development ideologies and marketing strategies pursued by regional, national and supranational actors. This is a consequence of both the neoliberalization of the global economy and a regionalist response. This article will problematize the current interpretations of region and regional identity. Further, based on a range of illustrations from Finland, this study will analyse the social production and transformation of regionality and spatial meaning making or identity building in this context. The article will study how discourses on regional identity have been historically produced, and how they are currently being exploited in various institutional contexts, especially regional planning. The paper also discusses how purported regional identities are related to the mobility of citizens and how this mobility challenges and claims to re-conceptualize spatial categories.

Keywords: region, regional identity, Finland.

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Resum: *Teoria i pràctica de la regió: una anàlisi contextual de la transformació de les regions fineses*

Regions i identitats regionals són avui dia qüestions rellevants en la investigació acadèmica, la planificació regional, les iniciatives de desenvolupament i estratègies promocionals promogudes per agents regionals, nacionals i supranacionals. Això és conseqüència alhora de la neoliberalització de l'economia global i d'una reacció regionalista. Aquest article pretén qüestionar les actuals interpretacions de regió i identitat regional. A més, en base a exemples referits a Finlàndia, s'analitza la producció social i transformació de la regionalitat i la creació de significació espacial o la corresponent construcció identitària. El treball pretén estudiar com els discursos sobre la identitat regional tenen una gènesi històrica, i com actualment són aprofitats en diversos contextos institucionals, particularment en la planificació regional. També es planteja que preteses identitats regionals es relacionen amb la mobilitat de la ciutadania i com aquesta mobilitat obliga a reconceptualitzar les categories espacials.

Paraules clau: regió, identitat regional, Finlàndia.

Resumen: *Teoría y práctica de la región: un análisis contextual de la transformación de las regiones finlandesas*

Regiones e identidades regionales son hoy día cuestiones relevantes en la investigación académica, la planificación regional, las iniciativas de desarrollo y estrategias promocionales promovidas por agentes regionales, nacionales y supranacionales. Ello es consecuencia tanto de la neoliberalización de la economía global como de una reacción regionalista. Este artículo pretende cuestionar las actuales interpretaciones de región e identidad regional. Además, en base a ejemplos referidos a Finlandia, se analiza la producción social y transformación de la regionalidad y la creación de significación espacial o su correspondiente construcción identitària. El trabajo pretende estudiar cómo los discursos sobre la identidad regional tienen una génesis histórica, y cómo actualmente son aprovechados en diversos contextos institucionales, particularmente en la planificación regional. También se plantea que pretendidas identidades regionales se relacionan con la movilidad de la ciudadanía y cómo esa movilidad obliga a reconceptualizar las categorías espaciales.

Palabras clave: región, identidad regional, Finlandia.

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Introduction

Region and regional identity have been important categories for geographers since the institutionalization of the academic field. These keywords have seen a revival in academic research and policy debates since the 1990s. New interest has blossomed in geography, International Relations and political science, for instance, and has been related to the transformation of the globalizing geoeconomic landscape (Paasi, 2009). Respectively, the region, the traditional key category of geography and territorial governance, has been recognized as a key

context for economic success and competitiveness, and for regional planning activities (Keating, 1998; Bristow, 2010). Scholars such as Scott and Storper (2003) soon specified the regions in question as 'city-regions', agglomerations with dense masses of interrelated economic activities which were regarded as locomotives of economic growth in national economies. Respectively city-region has become the core of regional planning and development schemes in many states but 'region' itself has also maintained its position in both academic studies and planning circles. Regional identity, for its part, has become important in cultural discourse, planning and region/place marketing. It is seen as important in the globalizing world since regional economic success is inseparable from social, cultural and institutional accomplishment (Cooke and Morgan, 1994). Regional identity has also been important in the EU policies with the aim to use this 'soft' tool to create new ground for regional development and competitiveness and to promote territorial cohesion and to achieve spatial equity.

Regional transformation and the production and re-scaling of state spaces, the context for the purported competition between regions, has been interpreted as a consequence of both neo-liberalization of the global economy and a regional(ist) response to this (Rumford, 2000). There has been much debate on how 'region' should be understood under such circumstances (Allen and Cochrane, 2007; Morgan, 2007). Researchers suggest increasingly often that 'region' is not a separate scale in the hierarchical spatial organization of the state but rather an outcome and manifestation of perpetual and contested meaning making occurring in a wide network of social relations that come together in 'regions'. At the same time the universalizing tendencies often hidden in regional concept have been challenged, and the context-bound character of both regions and identity discourses has been accentuated. Keating (1998, p. 92), for example, accentuates the contextual character of regional identity and how it is moulded by diverging events and political strategies, and can be mobilized for different purposes.

The paper will study the ideas of region and regional identity with a particular emphasis on Finnish *context*. Yet, to follow the approach discussed above, this implies, that Finnish regions are not separate islands in the world or even in the Finnish state but part of the wider region-building processes occurring in the contemporary Europe and international geo-economic landscape. The text will both theorize the meanings attached to region and regional identity and examine these issues empirically with the aim of unpacking the elements that are often taken for granted in the use of such categories (Paasi, 2010). Regions are not merely passive backgrounds for social action, but rather they are both constituted by and constitutive of the institutionalization of this very action that fuses space, power relations, ideological struggle over meanings and identity discourses and materiality. In order to look at such issues in context, the paper analyses the institutionalization of the Finnish regions, the changing relations between local/municipal and regional govern-

ance, and the escalation of *multi-scalar* regional dynamics during the last 16 years since Finland became a member of the EU. The institutionalization of regions is understood here as a condensation of path-dependent political and regional economic geographies as part of a wider spatial and social division of labour and power relations.

The article will first discuss the contexts of the resurgence of the region and the question of regional boundedness. The next step is to map how 'regional identity' has become a catchword in regional development discourse, how it has been understood, and how it has been conceptualized. These conceptual perspectives will be used to scrutinize the transformation of the Finnish regions. As a particular case, the paper will investigate how the ideas of region and regional identity are used in regional planning by Finnish Regional Councils. The aim is to look at, by analysing the institutionalization of the Finnish regional system and the perpetual production of 'regionality', how this process brings together traditional inwards-looking regional identity discourses, the EU's aims to create social solidarity and cohesion, and the neo-liberal desire for regional competition. Finally, the paper will discuss how the increasing mobility of citizens between regions suggests that it is useful to conceptualize identities in new ways.

The resurgence of regions and regional identity

The state has been the key context for region-building and regionalization processes, and this seems to hold good also in the post-Cold War world. From this angle, the new interest in regions is an expression of the changing functions and re-scaling processes of state governance that have occurred as part of globalization and of efforts to manage uneven development and regulate the forms of capital accumulation (Jessop, 2002; Brenner *et al.*, 2003). State governments have not simply downscaled or up-scaled their regulatory powers through regionalization (even if this may be one motive in the transformation of governance), but rather have tried to institutionalize competitive relations between major sub-national units as a means of positioning the 'regional' and 'local' strategically within broader, supranational (European and global) circuits of capital (Brenner, 2004). It is crucial to recognize that such 'scales' are not neatly separated hierarchical elements but are always bound to, or perhaps even 'wrapped' within, each other.

Regions are more often than not seen as 'social constructs', but this idea seems to mean different things to different authors (Paasi, 2010). For some scholars, regions are ready-made constructs that are 'background' contexts for social action, while others see them as historically contingent social processes and discourses "in the making" that may become institutionalized as part of wider social and material relations and frameworks of power (Paasi, 1991). The so-called relational view has challenged the boundedness of regions, and

suggests that regions should be recognized as open, unbound entities (Allen *et al.*, 1998). Other scholars have reminded us that the boundedness of regions is ultimately an empirical rather than a theoretical matter (Hudson, 2007). The boundedness of regions is also historically contingent. Although regions may be 'bounded units' in administration, this does not mean that they should be exclusive or that they are necessarily significant in other spheres of society or in the region in question (Morgan, 2007). Indeed, regions may exist concomitantly in various overlapping territorial shapes.

Regional identity has become a much used slogan in planning and regional governance, and it is often understood as a 'soft' tool used by authorities worldwide in the promotion of social cohesion, cooperation, regional marketing and economic development. It has thus become a political resource for performance in a wider regional development process. The performing of regional identity means that the identity discourse is produced and reproduced in social action rather than existing prior to it (Donaldson, 2006). One part of the rescaling of the state is thus the 'mobilization of minds' that takes place through such performances. Regional identity is also related to the debate on the bounded vs. open nature of regions and some scholars have challenged not only bounded regions but also regional identities. Given that boundedness is related to the institutionalization of regions, a border is not merely a line surrounding a regional entity but a complex element that is fused with territorial practice: symbolism, institutions and meaning making all around the region (Paasi, 2009). This means that 'boundedness' is in fact one modality of the institutional complexity of a region. Regional symbols and meanings often bring together the past, present and future of a region, and they have a key role in making the region a meaningful unit for social and economic life both 'inside' and 'outside'. The key function of symbols is to produce and reproduce social integration and socio-spatial distinction. Such symbolism also renders possible the representation, signification and legitimation of the regional 'reality' that exists outside immediate daily experience. Respectively regions or territories can have 'borders' but they do not need to be strictly 'bounded'. Indeed borders are often results of networked activities or what Allen (2009) calls topological relations.

Respectively regional identity is, contrary to the blunt assumption that there is (or is *not*) such an entity as 'regional identity', an analytical category that forces us to make abstractions regarding the time/space-specific structuration of relations between individuals, institutions, power and wider socio-spatial structures. It is hence beneficial to distinguish *analytically* between the identity of a region, and the regional identity or regional consciousness of the people living in a region or outside it. The former refers to elements of nature, culture and citizens that are exploited in the discourses and classifications of science, politics, cultural activism, regional marketing, tourism, governance and political or religious regionalization (Paasi, 2003). Such classifications are normally used to distinguish one region from others for vari-

ous purposes, and are acts of power performed to delimit and symbolize space and inherent groups of people. The regional identity of people, or regional consciousness, refers to the identification of people with 'regions', which is just one element of complex socio-spatial identifications. People may, of course, identify themselves with a number of spatial units and social groups that take on different material and social shapes.

Discourses on regional identity are one element in the perpetual struggle to institutionalize and re-institutionalize regions, and in the ideological meanings inherent in this. The analytical division between forms of regional identity implies that institutional identity discourses are related to (spatial) divisions of labour. This raises a question concerning the actors that contribute to the production and reproduction of institutional identities and what their forms of action are, i.e. the 'identity work' that they perform. It is possible to distinguish two forms of agency and make an analytical distinction between *activists* and *advocates*, which helps to understand how spatial socialization takes place (Paasi, 2010).

Activists are persons (or social groups) that may participate in the politics of region and struggle over specific meanings which they either represent as 'regional' or which are generated in a specific regional context. The former is typical in the case of regionalist movements that are typically led by visible, charismatic actors. Activists typically manage publicity and participate in public political debates. During the last few decades ethnic consciousness has increasingly emerged from minorities themselves, and this has accentuated the role of activists and the media in how they can make their voices heard. The idea of a specific (culturally, ethnically or politically) bounded 'region' and a purported regional identity may be important in prompting the actions of such social groups.

Advocates are actors operating in certain institutionalized subject positions with a continuity which means that even if the actors as such change, their advocacy will continue. They can be activists at the same time, but we suggest that much of their power in the production of identity discourses and regional ideologies emerges from their institutional position, and thus, contrary to visible activists, they are constitutive of the 'anonymous authority' that manifests itself in regional public opinion or 'structures of expectations' (Paasi, 1991).

The distinction between activists and advocates helps us to understand how different social positions may be significant in the production and reproduction of social institutions, spatial images and symbolism, which may ultimately become structured along with the rise of organizations that are linked with a region via their function and/or sphere of influence. The next section will look at such elements by scrutinizing the transformation of Finland's regional structures and how the institutional meaning making of regions has occurred historically and during the current EU period. Respectively, the key emphasis in this paper is on identity discourses generated by regional advocates.

The transformation of the Finnish regional system

We will now look briefly at the Finnish regional units that have been crucial in administration and regional identity discourse. A distinction between 'old' and 'new' regions will help us to recognize the fact that with the regional worlds increasingly becoming networked, the political, cultural and economic meanings of regions often manifest themselves simultaneously on various *historical* and *spatial* 'scales' (Paasi, 2009).

Old regions have normally become institutionalized as part of the rising spatial and social divisions of labour, and are often established parts of the regional system and social consciousness. They may be significant contexts for identification and also for *institutional* identity discourses and practices performed by advocates involved with regional development, the media or the cultural and economic promotion of the region in question. New regions are typically constructed as *ad hoc* projects aimed at developing or increasing the competitiveness of such units (Paasi, 2009). Good examples are the 'non-standard' or 'unusual' regions in the EU (Deas and Lord, 2006). As a-historical, bureaucratic constructs, they often remain separate from daily life and the identification of citizens, even though they may be important in institutional identity discourses developed by advocates in regional planning or marketing circles, for instance.

Finnish regional system is a complex mix of old and new regions existing on several spatial levels. By tradition, they have had different meanings in both governance and as sources of regional identity discourses. The most important 'old regions' from the viewpoint of state governance have been the counties (*lääni*) and municipalities (*kunta*). The counties originate from the 16th century, when nine 'castle counties' (*linnalääni*) were established by the Swedish crown to control the area of Finland. Their number increased gradually until the 1980s, finally reaching 12. The efforts to adapt Finland to the regional system of the EU led to a reduction in their number to five in 1997. The counties have been headed by governors, who have often been important advocates of their regions in public debates. The long history of the counties came to the end in the course of 2009, when the system was abolished and the functions of the counties were devolved to other regional units. The decision to abolish the system of counties led the peripheral regional press to mourn the passing of the visible institution of governor and insist that 'the provinces need a face', an authoritative, high-profile figure who can 'fill the vacuum that has emerged with the loss of the governors' (Kaleva, 2009).

The Castle counties have been referred to at times as *historical provinces*. The original nine historical provinces are no longer significant, nor do they have any actual meaning in popular consciousness—even though each of them is symbolized by an old coat of arms. This regional division also differs from current system of 19 provinces (plus Åland islands that have an autonomous position) that became the key units of regional governance and identity discourses in the

mid-1990s. Most provinces have become institutionalized gradually since the 19th century as part of the emerging spatial divisions of labour between the centers and the surrounding (rural) areas. In this process a more or less clear territorial and symbolic shape (name, provincial symbols and cultural institutions) and various institutions aimed at maintaining such shapes emerged (Paasi, 1986). The provincial associations established earlier to act as cultural and economic advocates became known as *Regional Councils* (RC) in 1994. These units received new functions that merged their old role of regional advocacy with the earlier state-related regional planning tasks (e.g. land use planning) performed by the Regional Planning Associations that had represented federations of municipalities. The transfer of the responsibility for regional development to the RCs enhanced the regional networks of governance and improved the lucidity of administration (Haveri, 1997, p. 151). The main improvement, however, was the augmentation of bottom-up processes in regional development. These trends may also have caused unnecessary competition inside the regions, however, as it is often felt, for example, that the provincial centre is being developed at the expense of the more peripheral municipalities.

The *municipalities* were established during the 19th century on the basis of the old parishes, as the church had had a key role in the administration of society at large prior to that time. Their role as representatives of local government and foci of local identity is based not only on their long standing as institutions but also on their functions as cradles of 'local paternalism', being the providers of basic education, local health care and a number of services and cultural facilities (such as sports, libraries and theatres), sources of political representation, collectors of municipal and property taxes and creators of a symbolic, or even symbiotic, exchange network between the region and its citizens. A number of municipalities also have local media (newspapers, radio, etc.) and numerous institutions of civil society operate at this level.

The number of municipalities, which was more than 600 before World War II, has gradually decreased because of mergers, but there are still 336 of them. They vary considerably in size and population, and many of them are now experiencing difficulties in producing the statutory services because of their unfavourable demographic structure. January 2009 witnessed a wave of no less than 32 mergers involving altogether 99 municipalities, which reduced their total number by 67. Such mergers have become an attractive image-building strategy in competitive urban policy in recent years, since, besides creating more functional labour and housing market areas, this has become one way of altering the rank order of the cities. On the other hand, the decision-makers in many rural municipalities located on the borders of cities are adamant in maintaining their independence while benefiting from the adjacent labour markets and services. Many mergers of municipalities have aroused major debates over the names of new entities created, and demands have been made for the holding of plebiscites on the issue. The role of the municipalities in regional identity has become evident in movements that have expressed a 'resistance identity' (Castells, 2004).

The 70 *sub-regions* were a fitting example of new regions that were officially established as NUTS IV areas in 1994 as part of the process of adaptation to the EU's regional system, although some units had a history of a sort as mental constructs (including their names). These 'new regions' have been somewhat heterogeneous, however, consisting of some city-regions, several minor towns with their surrounding country areas or simply alliances of rural municipalities. Regional identity in connection with these units has also been problematic. Firstly, their institutionalization has not occurred historically but in an *ad hoc* manner and through a form of place promotion that does not fit with any existing, well-known regional demarcations. Secondly, citizens do not generally identify themselves with these new regions, which are regarded as artificial, primarily administrative constructs created in a top-down manner (Zimmerbauer, 2004 and 2011).

Apart from these key divisions, the Finnish regional administration has consisted of innumerable 'invisible' overlapping systems of districts representing various sectors of state administration. A major government-commissioned restructuring (in addition to the current wave of municipality mergers) was finished by 2010, when the whole regional administration was once again reorganized. The new plan represents an attempt to overcome various obstacles that have emerged as a consequence of the historical fragmentation of the administration (Pribilla, 2006) and involved the establishment of two new authorities with the aim of creating a system of regional state administration which builds on citizens and customers needs and works in an efficient and effective way. The first of these authorities, the Regional State Administrative Agency (AVI), is responsible for security, legal protection and immigration, and the other, the Centre for Business and Industry, Transport and the Environment (ELY) for employment, business, transport and cultural matters. There are 15 ELY regions and 6 AVI regions nationwide, most of the latter being created by combining several provinces. This was a strictly top-down process that added yet another layer of re-definition to the history of the Finnish regions. It was also regional, however, in the sense that regional actors had an opportunity to express their needs and ideas regarding the regions that were under construction (HS, 2008). It is even possible that the number of provinces may be cut down in the long run by combining them into larger units, a tendency that will be represented initially by the AVI network.

Institutional identity discourses and the making of provinces

As we see from the above, the Finnish regional system is both complex and historically contingent and has been perpetually 'spread' or 'networked' to several spatial scales that have carried different meanings and have represented forms of governance and cultural and economic practices that have

interacted across these scales and have been regionalized in complex ways. To make any theoretical or practical sense of 'regional identity' in the case of such regions, we have to reflect on 'identity' both from the institutional viewpoint, i.e. how identity discourses are produced and reproduced by activists and advocates representing various institutions or organizations, and from the perspective of individual actors, by looking at regional consciousness. The current institutional advocacy on regional identities, learning regions, or social capital has emerged from the changes that have taken place in national and EU politics. This advocacy is an example of how the rescaling of the state is related to the 'mobilization of minds' and the identity discourses are produced and reproduced in the course of this activity rather than existing prior to it.

While a number of surveys have shown that the Finns typically identify themselves with their municipalities, institutional identity discourses have not been historically associated with these units. The province (*maakunta*) has been most significant region in this respect since the 19th century, and its historical role as the key unit for identity discourses has been effectively recycled by the RCs since Finland joined the EU. We will look next at the how Regional Councils representing provinces promote regional identities.

How do the Regional Councils mobilise 'regions' and regional identities?²

Provincial planning is now the most important strategic tool for regional development, i.e. the instruments for development are largely regionally based. The plans laid down by the RCs every four-five years define long-term objectives and strategies, provide comprehensive treatments of regional development and integrate the relevant policies. Wallin and Roininen (2005) conclude that regional plans accentuate economic performance and the attractiveness of the region. Business and marketing discourses are significant in most reports, and the objectives of development are linked to the goal of ensuring the smooth functioning of businesses by boosting the structures of 'know-how' and expertise. Practically every plan wants to profile its province as a 'high-tech region'. In addition, the improvement of the regional image for marketing purposes is a key objective in many plans.

Although the provincial plans apparently stand for bottom-up development, many of their themes and the rhetoric in them are in fact top-down by nature, which is obviously closely connected with the policies and structural funds of the EU, as the RCs are dealing with these and are forced to use the appropriate language. The policies and rhetoric of European competitiveness are thereby effectively absorbed into the regional plans, causing a striking similarity

2. This section is based on an analysis of 39 regional plans that have been prepared between 1999-2011.

between them. Planners and developers in the regions end up by reconstituting the same phrases that have been fed to them by the Eurocrats. This means that competitiveness, creativity and innovativeness are frequently used catchwords in the current vocabulary of regional development in a way confirming observations on the transnationalisation of the planning vocabulary (Healey and Upton, 2011).

The relatively open and ambiguous historical identity of provinces has not prevented the use of identity discourse in the strategic long-term plans drawn up by the RCs. An analysis of the plans shows that a both spatially and temporally inward-looking regional identity is discussed in most plans, but that they rarely specify what this purported identity means, i.e. whether it is the identity of the region, the regional consciousness of its inhabitants or both that is being discussed (Paasi, 2009). At times identity is related to the image of the region, which accentuates the marketing aspects. The reports do not consist only of text, however, but also include maps and illustrations that clearly strive to give an impression of the unique character of the province concerned and its position in the wider world (Wallin and Roininen, 2005).

Regional identity is not the only popular (transnational) term used in strategic planning, as social capital and learning region are similarly common. But although their importance for regional development is recognized, they are not conceptualized in any way. While regional identity discourses normally have a material and historical connection with regions, social capital and learning region do not: the plans include a number of examples of development rhetoric that is 'plucked out of the air', which may lead to unrealistic policy perspectives (Lovering, 1999; Raco, 2006). Diverging aspects of identity, traditions, myths and development optimism often come together in this rhetoric (Paasi, 2009). While regional identity is mentioned in most documents, it is on the whole relatively marginal among the development assets presented in the plans (Wallin and Roininen, 2005).

The social message of these discourses is clear, since they tend to pass over societal antagonisms and see the people as 'regional citizens' in the sense that none of the plans contains any discussion or information on the existence of social classes or political conflicts, for example. Those producing such plans are constructs an image of ideal, harmonious communities (Paasi, 2009). The ethnic dimension is noted implicitly in some cases when the importance of multiculturalism is raised. On the other hand, the reports also personalize regions at times and present them as collective actors engaged in a struggle with other regions, although the existence of such inward-looking identity discourses in the plans does not mean that regions are seen as self-contained, since their openness and their roles as nodes in a wider economic and cultural matrix are typically accentuated at the same time. This illustrates well how social activities occurring on different spatial scales may become fused.

Regional identification of citizens

If the production of regional identity discourse in Finland emerged as one part of the nation-building process the current discourse promoted by planning organizations are often associated with the processes of globalization and the purported competition between 'regions' in the neo-liberal capitalist landscape, i.e. these discourses have also become rescaled. What about people in this landscape? Where the carefully constructed discourses of provincial plans remain remote from daily life, as their main audience is composed of other civil servants, it is obvious that ordinary people are faced with the region as it "really exists" and the institutional identity discourses in newspapers, school books or novels that provide the tools for regional attachment.

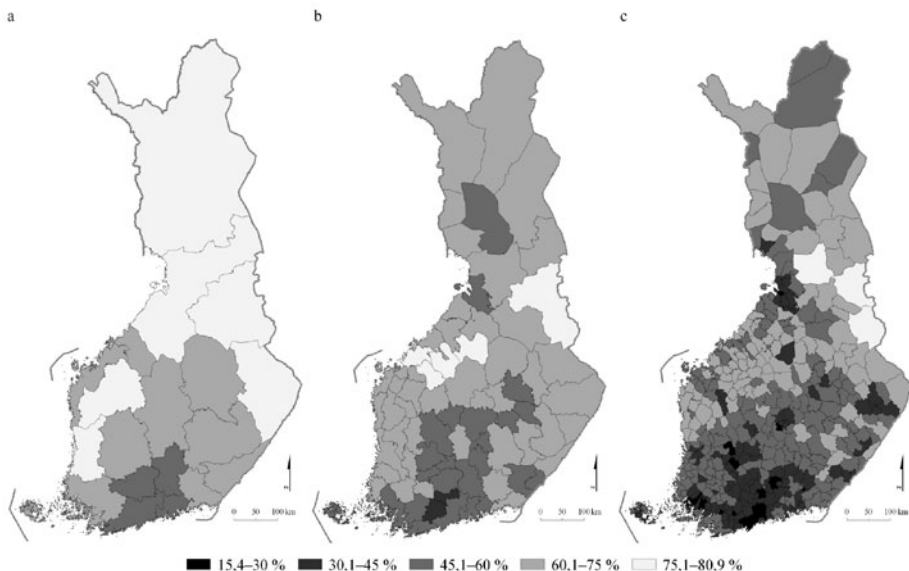
Several studies have been conducted to scrutinize such attachment in Finland, usually barometer studies in which respondents have been asked to choose between given regions or scales. The results vary to some extent from study to study, but one common observation is that the Finns seem to identify themselves most typically with the national scale and municipal levels. A large survey involving 1.500 Finns in six provinces revealed the generally modest role of the provinces in everyday life (Kuitunen *et al.*, 2003). People had rarely been in contact with their RC, and 50-60% could not name any provincial institution such as an RC. As many as 30-40% did not know who can be appointed to a regional assembly, and 6-25% were unable to name the director of their own regional council. About 70% of people suggested that the decision-making that took place in RCs was far removed from daily life. In spite of these results, the survey showed that identification with the respective region was fairly strong (69-85%) in all the provinces. This doubtless partly harks back to regional advocacy, in that 50-70% of the respondents in these regions said that they "follow provincial matters" in the media a great deal or to some extent and mentioned "provincial events" and the history of the provinces as the major backgrounds for their identification. Furthermore, 60-85% agreed that 'togetherness' should be strengthened.

The current realities of mobility force us to develop new perspectives in order to understand how individual life histories –which are rarely confined to just one region– are related to the regions. Fig. 1, which shows the percentage of inhabitants born in the municipalities, sub-regions and provinces where they lived in 2007, indicates that most people were living outside the municipality of their birth, and this was also the case with a number of sub-regions that were created to represent NUTS 4 level in Finland, especially those in the more urbanized regions and corridors. Only on a provincial scale does the situation change, so that typically 60-80% of people were still living in the province of their birth. This certainly gives some soundboard for regional identity discourses. The only exception to this pattern is the densely populated 'mixed' area in southern Finland. These observations raise some questions. How do 'individual' and 'institutional' considerations come together in

the creation of social ‘memberships’ in regional contexts? How do such identities become scaled and manifest themselves? Earlier studies suggest that people do not inevitably reflect identity in spatial terms in their lives (Paasi, 1996). Technical surveys have shown that people still identify with various areal units such as municipalities and provinces, but they do not always actually reveal what the areas in question are.

Thus, it is useful to conceptualize the region as an institutional process created in the framework of the division of labour. In a mobile society it is useful to refer to the personal accumulation and reserve of spatial experiences and meanings as ‘place’, simply to challenge the traditional concept of place that is normally associated with spatial locations (Paasi, 1996). The realities of spatial mobility in Finland lead us to conceptualize spatialities on the basis of people’s biographies, and we suggest that identities regarding single regions become part of the collection of personal spatial experiences and meanings. These ‘collections’ based on human mobility and interactions actually show how important is the analytical distinction between institutional identity discourse and the identities accumulated during personal life histories.

Figure 1. Percentages of Finns living in their province (a), sub-region (b) and municipality (c) of birth (2007)



Much of the spatial identification in daily life takes place in civil society through participation in social networks and associations, often in many locations. Indeed, the empirical observations of Savage (2007) from the UK on the relations between biographies and identity and the change in identities from hierarchical (in the 1960s) to the current more relational or ‘granular’ ones lends

strong support to our analytical distinction between region and place, the former being an institutionally mediated category while the latter is associated with individual life histories rather than one specific bounded location (Paasi, 2002). As Savage (2007) shows, the level and form of identification can today reflect the increasing power of the granular spatial identities and 'elective belonging' associated with biographies. These personal spatial identifications exist in parallel with the identity discourses found in policy and planning documents. Such accumulated 'places' are unique, but partly shared because people also live their regional lives – permanently or temporarily – in the institutional realities of regions and participate in their production and reproduction.

Discussion

Contemporary regional systems and their dynamics are extremely complex, which also force us to conceptualize regions in dynamic and contextual ways. In this paper regions have been conceptualized as institutionally mediated dynamic structures that are produced, reproduced and at times removed in complex power relations and in the spatial division of labour. This means that once regions have become institutionalized they do not disappear even if some strategic activists involved in the region and its identity building process or 'regional advocates' (journalists, politicians, teachers, etc.) move away from the region and go on to accumulate their personal 'place' elsewhere; others will simply come in to fill these institutional positions in the division of labour. Conversely, activists may also continue to work from outside a region.

The analysis of regional dynamics and identity discourse in a Finnish context suggest that both regions and regional policies are increasingly being constructed by fusing social practices and discourses so that institutional needs and policies are related to the purported will and needs of citizens. Planning practices and rhetoric seem to have become increasingly global and divorced from the daily lives of citizens.

This analysis shows that the 'region' is not a separate, bounded unit or 'scale' but a *process* of institutionalization that simultaneously brings together local, national and global processes, interactions and power relations. A region is thus not a fixed 'horizontal' expression of spatial organization, but is also vertical and historical at the same time. We may well understand regions as constituted by networks, so that the boundedness of regions that exists in certain social practices (such as administration) is also realized in and through such networks and interactions. Evidence for this can be found in Finnish provincial planning, as analysed here, which is not based on interviews with citizens but leans strongly on normative assumptions and idea(l)s of a self-evident role for the regional identities of social collectives.

Correspondingly, spatial scales are not fixed, distinct levels of the social world but, as manifestations of regionality, they are structured and institutionalized in complex ways in de-/re-territorializing practices and discourses that may be partly concrete, powerful and bounded, and partly unbounded, vague and invisible

–perhaps even at the same time. Region is thus best seen through abstractions that strive to conceptualize the process through which such a unit emerges as part of the quest to structure reality and becomes a vehicle for institutionalizing the spatialities involved in such a complex social process. From this viewpoint the effort to answer categorically the question of whether borders are important or not, is simply absurd. Such an answer would always require the conceptualization and analysis of spatialities, power relations and meanings in context.

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